

Ambassador Michael Owen visits Aberdeen Women's Center



Project Director Jude Holden introduces AWC's oldest current patient, 60 year old Ajama Fullah, to Ambassador Michael Owen

The United States Ambassador Michael S. Owen visited the Aberdeen Women's Center (AWC) in Freetown June 29th, to learn more about their life-changing work. For mothers-to-be, Sierra Leone is one of the most difficult countries in the world. With an average of 5 births per woman, almost one in 20 women will die of pregnancy related causes while many others who experience difficult deliveries suffer the debilitating result known as obstetric fistula. USAID is supporting the Aberdeen Women's Center in Freetown to provide surgical repairs for women and girls from all over Sierra Leone.

The AWC's Director, Jude Holden explained that because of the extreme stigma surrounding fistula, it is often difficult for women to access information and referral services in order to obtain quality treatment. AWC sends teams into Sierra Leone's interior to identify candidates for the surgery, but some women suffer with fistula for many years before they learn about the services and treatment available. At 60, Temne-speaking Ajama Fullah from the north of the country, who has had ten children, is the oldest fistula patient currently in the hospital. She is eagerly waiting for surgery for a complex fistula. However, many of the patients who come to the facility are teenagers, who are at higher risk of fistula during delivery because of their age.

In the past year, USAID has supported the AWC to treat 189 women with fistula. The Center works hard to offer a high standard of care. As she stands on the surgical side of the prominent red line outside the operating rooms with the Ambassador on the other, theater nurse Lucy Kanyato, wearing her green

scrubs, explains how the center uses best practice to ensure the theater area is kept sterile. During surgery, spinal anesthetic is used, so the women are able to understand and communicate. Following the procedure, the women are monitored in the recovery room until they are well enough for the nurse to take them back and care for them on the ward.

The women spend an average of three weeks at the Center. To improve their overall health and nutrition, the women enjoy a varied diet including rice, sauce, cassava, pumpkin and chicken. During this time, women also form close friendships in the facility, a new experience for many who have been socially isolated from their husbands, families and communities, often for many years. While they await and recover from surgery, the women are given support with literacy and numeracy skills, as well as learning some basic crafts skills to help them make a new start in their communities once they return. To mark their transition to a new life, the women are given new clothing to mark their reintegration into society; they dress up, sing and dance together during their Gladi Gladi ceremony and AWC sends them off with new hope and optimism for a better life.



Anna and Hawanatu have formed a strong friendship while recovering from their surgery



Operating Room Supervisor, Lucy Kanyato, stands in the sterile zone explaining the layout of the theater area



After surgery, each woman is made a new set of clothes so she can go back to her community with pride